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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: CHECHNYA: DEATH OF SADULLAYEV

Classified By: A/POL Bruce Donahue. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Accounts of the June 17 killing of Chechen rebel "President" Sadullayev vary, but it was probably a chance firefight. Reaction has been low-key. Sadullayev's relevance was more political than military, and his death will probably have little effect on the rebels' military or terrorist operations. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Chechen police killed rebel "President" Abdulhalim Sadullayev June 17 in a suburb of Argun, in Chechnya. Accounts of the operation vary widely. Chechen Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov claimed in the press that one of Sadullayev's companions sold him out for 1500 rubles to buy narcotics. Kadyrov claimed that Sadullayev had been outside Chechnya until the previous week and had returned to plan a terrorist operation. "Kommersant" gave a more believable account: a construction worker had tipped police off that there were suspicious-looking bearded men hiding in the house next to his site. The police, suspecting a cell of fighters -- but without a clue as to their identity -- sent a large force which quickly got into a firefight with the men in the house. Two of the militants succeeded in escaping. When the firing ended, a body found in the basement was soon identified as Sadullayev's.

¶3. (C) Local press commentary has been low-key, with commentators pointing out that Shamil Basayev wields the real power among the fighters. Indeed, the fact that Sadullayev was hiding in Argun is indicative of his irrelevance to the armed conflict. Argun is where Sadullayev might feel safest -- it is his home town as well as the seat of his "teyp," or clan. However, it is in the lowlands and firmly in the control of Chechen government security forces. Sadullayev's communication with fighters would have been tenuous.

¶4. (C) Russian nationalist pundit Sergey Markedonov pointed out two significant differences between Sadullayev's killing and that of his predecessor, Aslan Maskhadov, in 2005. When Maskhadov was killed, he told us, the Western press played it up. This time, the West was silent: "they are no longer interested." When Maskhadov was killed the Kremlin also played it up, and took credit for a great victory. This time, the only person taking the credit was Ramzan Kadyrov. In Markedonov's view, the killing represents only further evidence of the split in the ranks of the separatists: between those who remain loyal to the rebellion and those who have pursued separatism by making a deal with the Kremlin -- i.e., Kadyrov.

¶5. (C) An official of the Presidential Administration told us that Sadullayev was respected among the fighters because he never engaged in the factional fighting that characterized rebel politics. However, he was little known in the rest of Chechen society. The official said that whoever replaced Sadullayev would be from Maskhadov's faction, but that would be irrelevant: "Basayev considers himself the lord of Chechnya, and will kill Sadullayev's successor the moment he

gets in Basayev's way." More in sorrow than in anger, the official noted that the desperation of the population and the "stupidity" of the security services were combining to strengthen armed Islamic jihadism throughout the North Caucasus. The Chechen people, he thought, were on the verge of destruction. Owing to Kremlin policies, they were caught between Ramzan Kadyrov with his "repellent" cult of personality and Basayev's murderous radicalism.

Comment

16. (C) The effects of Sadullayev's death will be more political than military. Sadullayev's function seems to have been no more than hortatory -- appearing on the Kavkaz-Tsentr website and communicating with Chechens promoting the rebel cause in the West, such as "Foreign Minister" Akhmad Zakayev.

Sadullayev's actual presidential powers appear to have been minimal and his command of rebel forces theoretical at best.

Sadullayev's "legal" successor is the field commander Doku Umarov, last seen in a camera-phone video touring the Caucasian hills with Shamil Basayev. Basayev will continue to exercise real power through his leadership of the Defense Council. Umarov will probably continue his operations as field commander as before. The minimal political role that Sadullayev played will either lapse or gravitate to Chechens abroad such as Zakayev and Movladi Udugov.

17. (C) Sadullayev's death may have one other effect. The rebels have pulled off no spectacular military or terrorist acts in over a year. This failure has had a negative effect on their fundraising abilities, especially as they are competing for funds with Jihadist insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. On a recent visit to Chechnya, we were told

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that the security services there expect a major terrorist operation; the insurgents' goal would be to prove they are still a potent force "and earn their money," as the Presidential Administration official put it. Our interlocutors agreed that a spectacular terrorist operation outside Chechnya would be easier for the rebels to pull off than a military attack inside Chechnya.

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